

## INTRODUCTION

### White Crisis and the Value of *Losing One's Way*

George Yancy

The fact that we notice such arrivals tells us more about what is already in place than it does about “the who” that arrives.<sup>1</sup>

Sara Ahmed

The above epigraph speaks to the *lived* reality of academics of color who teach at predominantly White universities, and powerfully captures the phenomenological predicament of the critical cadre of scholars of color within the important text—*Exploring Race in Predominantly White Classrooms: Scholars of Color Reflect*—that you hold before you. We walk into classrooms where our bodies are always already marked, where White racist normative assumptions truncate who we are and what we are deemed “capable” of teaching. Within this “sea of whiteness,” we move against the tide of White gazes that attempt to fix us according to iterative frames of reference that have become normalized and naturalized ways of making sense of the social world. “To see” a body of color in the capacity of professor/teacher is “to know” a priori about that body. This is a situation where perception and knowledge are collapsed, where “to know” bodies of color is “to see” bodies of color, and where, conversely, “to see” bodies of color is “to know” bodies of color. We are seen as “inferior,” as intellectually “inadequate” in relationship to our White colleagues, as somehow “out of place.” We are also marked as pseudo-scholars who often teach subjects that are specific to an identity politics gone awry. White gazes surround us. We feel their penetrating curiosity, their wonderment. While unspoken, their White gazes are interrogative: “Just who do you think you are?” “Are you really qualified?” “Are you sure you have the right classroom?” And even after their initial skepticism has subsided, and as the semester progresses, their White gazes, bodily postures, styles of questioning,

innuendoes, hubris, and interrogations create a space that is unwelcoming, a space that is hermeneutically hostile to our self-understanding as experts in our various academic fields. Within the context of White philosophical academic spaces, Linda Alcoff writes:

As a Latina in the academic world of North American philosophy, I regularly feel that, indeed, I have lost, or am in the process of losing, my marbles. Neither my general lived experience, nor my reference points in argumentation, nor my routine affective responses to events, nor my philosophical intuitions are shared with most people in my immediate milieu.<sup>2</sup>

Alcoff's point here is that she seems to occupy a different life-world, a different epistemic and affective geography.

Both predominantly White academic institutions and White classrooms convey White territoriality. It is as if one has entered a neighborhood governed and controlled by a White covenant that bespeaks your desired absence. Within this space, it feels as if one's presence is being policed as stoppable; where the social skin of the classroom does not call out to you with dialectical smoothness—that is, where you don't move within that space in such a way that it claims you as desirable, as someone “fit” to be in that space. Academic bodies of color within such White spaces “could be described in terms of the bodily and social experience of restriction, uncertainty, and blockage.”<sup>3</sup>

Linking themes of (a) claiming intellectual space with ease/difficulty, (b) the complexities and difficulties of identity formation within the predominantly White field of philosophy, and (c) the ways in which the field of philosophy signifies a space of whiteness that thereby specifically places under erasure Black women as *lovers of wisdom*, Donna-Dale Marciano writes:

This was brought home to me as I walked into [an] Introduction to Philosophy class and many others, consisting in my case of mostly young White boys, and realized that their ability to take up the position of the philosopher occurred with relative ease. Whether they accept or reject philosophy they are able to articulate their positions as knowers. But then again, they also are known by philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

To apply Marciano's point more broadly, one might argue that White bodies are always already sanctioned as “knowers” and are always already known as being at home within disciplinary matrixes of knowledge production. As a Black female philosopher, as someone who constitutes the quintessence of philosophical iconographic tension in relationship to the history of White philosophical assumptions, Marciano's body is stressed, noticed, even deemed oxymoronic. As Sara Ahmed writes, “White bodies are habitual insofar as they ‘trail behind’

actions: they do not get ‘stressed’ in their encounters with objects or others, as their whiteness ‘goes unnoticed.’”<sup>5</sup>

Unlike our White colleagues, it is said that we fail, because of our *raced bodies*, to appreciate universality, objectivity, and neutrality. In short, it is assumed that we can't do theory without it being “sullied” by our value-laden assumptions, by our ontological particularity. Our nonwhite skin color is marked as different or deviant, where our “raced” bodies become the foreground vis-à-vis an invisible background of whiteness qua normative. In other cases, our accents are deemed unintelligible, a sure sign of being alien and unlike those who speak “standard” American (White) English.

There are other times when we are seen as criminals who have somehow invaded the “sanctity” of White spaces, spaces where we are (must be) watched with suspicion. We have also been mistaken for the custodial help. And while working in this capacity on college campuses is not to be labeled ersatz, bodies of color, through the White gaze, fall “naturally” within the category of “the help.” We have also been sexualized in problematic ways. Women of color academics, for example, endure forms of oppressive multiplicity; they are deemed inferior as women and as hypersexual vis-à-vis their “exotic” features. At the end of the day, they are considered sexual playthings that are not to be taken seriously as academics, as persons who think and publish and do so with tremendous productivity, creativity, and rigor. Often entering within a broader intellectual tradition that already valorizes “mind” over “body,” “cognition” over “context,” the content of “knowledge claims” over “lived autobiography,” women of color academics—and academics of color, more generally—are reduced to their bodies, and their “academic” work is deemed idiosyncratic, hermetic, and biased.

Sara Ahmed's epigraph above, though, shifts the gaze away from, in this case, academic bodies of color. It is not about “us”; that is, bodies of color who *arrive*. Rather, it is about “them”; that is, White bodies, White institutional norms, White dominated spaces, White ways of being-in-the-world, and White power and hegemony that are *already in place*. And while reframing the problem does not rid us of the lived or phenomenological pain that we undergo as we enter such White dominated spaces, we are able to locate the source of our pain in problematic forms of White interpellation/hailing. We understand how the meaning that we give our embodied selves is “confiscated” and challenged through White gazes that return us to ourselves in ways that render us foreign to our self-understanding. Indeed, we are able to render such processes visible. Rendering such processes visible empowers us to militate against the ways in which White gazes may install forms of double consciousness that can result in profound expressions of epistemological violence.

So, when we walk into predominantly White classrooms, it is not about the ways in which we are problem bodies qua problem bodies. Our arrival is rendered hyper-visible because of how various social spaces—the classroom being one—are constituted as an enveloping White racial integument that holds together

White bodies and that installs those White bodies as familiar and “familial”; a social skin that calls to those bodies as wanted and as desirable. As a result, then, academics of color actually “intrude” upon a preexisting social intelligibility not because they are intrusive bodies as such, but because there already exists a form of White normative sedimentation that is operatively exclusionary. In short, it is the White bodies that inhabit those White spaces that constitute the conditions in terms of which academic bodies of color are deemed problematic.

As scholars of color who teach courses that critically engage questions of race and whiteness, we know all too well the specific challenges that we encourage White students to face. Moreover, we are witnesses to their resistance, anger, obfuscation, denial, and bad faith. In fact, we are often targets of their resentment. We are recipients of such resentment not simply because the conceptual content is so incredibly challenging to their place in the world and their White identities, but because of our embodiment as scholars of color. Our bodies function as texts that White students deploy against us, suggesting that we possess and express *personal* forms of animosity toward them *because they are White*.

In a course that I regularly teach entitled *Race Matters: Literary and Philosophical Perspectives*, a White undergraduate student shared with me that he was buying books for that course when confronted by another White student. “So, you’re taking a course with Dr. Yancy. You know he hates White people.” My student was bemused. During another time when teaching this course, a White student shared with the class that he told his father that we had been critically discussing the concept of whiteness, and his father said, “Be careful of Dr. Yancy. He is trying to get you to feel White guilt.” I immediately shared with the class how the “advice” of his father had not only misconstrued (indeed, distorted) the aims of my course, but that such defensive responses help to reinforce psychological barriers to growth and to preclude risk. His father may have thought that he was helping his son; protecting his son against my insidious efforts to get his son to feel guilty about what he had no part in creating—like the history of American slavery or the history of lynching Black bodies. Yet, it is my sense that he failed his son. Many of our White students already wear reactionary armor to protect them from engaging in critical forms of self-reflection on their whiteness, especially from the likes of us. You know, those academics of color that use their classroom spaces to guilt White students, and to leave them crying at the end of the day about being encased in White skin. Our classrooms are believed to function as cathartic spaces where we—finally—get even. His father reinforced his armor of resistance. Luckily, this one White student appeared to be aware of the dangerous implications of his father’s “advice.”

Yet, the courses that we, academics of color, teach that address the issue of race are designed to speak dangerously and courageously to various forms of White hegemony that oppress and marginalize people of color along the axis of race.<sup>6</sup> Teaching courses that critically engage race—specifically, whiteness—not only

disrupt forms of White complacency, privilege, and power within the classroom, but within the larger White academic institution itself and the society at large that is predicated upon White nation building. Yet, as many of us know, the violence has already been done to our White students before we face that sea of whiteness within our classrooms. This is a point to which I will return.

A philosophy graduate student shared with me recently that a fellow White philosophy graduate student said to her that he is *not* prepared to take any of my courses as he is *not* ready to face those parts of himself—yet. But of what is he afraid? While there are other graduate philosophy courses that I teach, two of those courses have been very challenging not only to my White students, but to me as well. My course *Critical Whiteness Studies* engages the historical dimensions of whiteness as a site of White bonding and collective identity formation. This identity formation is theorized as parasitic upon the nonwhite body. In fact, we engage the issue of whether or not White identity is anything other than a site of parasitism, which raises the possibility that White identity is empty except for its historical and current exercises of power, colonialism, and privilege. As the transcendental norm, whiteness defines nonwhiteness as “different” while it, whiteness, remains the same across a field of difference. Without its dependency on “difference,” though, we also explore the issue of the limits of whiteness and its possible vacuity. Within this course, White students are encouraged to think about whiteness within the context of the history of philosophy, and to think about ways in which their identities as White students of philosophy (many of whom will become professional White philosophers) have been subjected to processes of interpellation. As we engage issues of whiteness and philosophy, many if not all of them are struck by the fact that they are entangled within power relationships of which they were *not* previously cognizant. I have noticed that, for them, the experience can be existentially jolting; indeed, threatening to their sense of self, autonomy, and agency.

The other course that I teach is entitled *Phenomenology of Race*. In this course, we examine race through the lens of phenomenology, where we critically engage such themes as *Erlebnis*, race and social motility, whiteness as a lived site of spatial latitude, racial embodiment and forms of bodily malediction, whiteness and the social/spatial world as ready-to-hand, the White gaze and ontological truncation, the reduction of the body of color to its surface epidermis, the ontic dimensions of race vis-à-vis its socially constructed and intersubjective dimensions, etc. We also explore the ways in which White bodies are “at home” within philosophy departments, philosophy conferences, and such mundane spaces as philosophy department lounges, and how that *feeling* of being at home is a function of an assemblage of philosophical practices enacted by White, typically male, bodies, bodies that have become reified as the paragon of philosophical performance.

So, within that course, we collectively remove the veil that hides the fact that the category of “White philosopher” is a social construction that is embedded

within historically contingent norms, norms that masquerade as natural. The point here is that the White philosopher is not only historically positioned within a critical space where his/her philosophical assumptions are shown to be embedded within social-epistemic *White ways* of theorizing the world, but we think critically about the ways in which the White philosopher is always already part of a larger space of historical and institutional hegemony that *excludes* other (nonwhite) ways of knowing, being, valuing. In this way, my White philosophy graduates begin to think about the ways in which they are subjected to White racist technologies that underwrite who they are and what they deem philosophically of value.

In short, both of my courses are dangerous as they demand that my White students refuse to be silent about the quotidian operations of race in their lives, their philosophical lives, even as they attempt to separate the two. By “dangerous,” I don’t mean that White students (or any students) are exposed to physical danger. While I do make it clear to my White students that university classrooms, more generally, flirt too much with simulacra and fail to dwell with the existential funk of everyday life, physical safety is an unquestioned given.

From the above, it is clear to me what the one White graduate student feared/fears. He is afraid to give an account of himself, to critique his whiteness, and to begin to reimagine himself in ways that counter White normative and imaginative limits. By implication, then, in the other philosophy courses that he takes—those that don’t explore race and where the professors look like him, even when they don’t share his gender or sexual orientation—he is at peace with his identity as a White male, he is able to be fully in the space of the classroom in the mode of mythical self-possession. Those courses, presumably, don’t force him to recognize how his White embodiment is constituted within that space as a philosophical ally. He does not recognize how his presence helps to constitute those philosophical spaces as normative. I am not suggesting that he should not take those courses. My point is that he needs to be honest; philosophy needs to be honest. If my courses encourage him to engage his philosophical White identity critically as a site that is complicit with White racism and he begins to see this connection, whereas those other courses apparently normalize his philosophical White identity and worldview as they seemingly engage racially neutral concepts formulated by apparently transracial abstract minds, then it is his responsibility to begin to challenge the ways in which, as I would put it, he is a racist. After all, he will more than likely be one of those White philosophy graduate students, along with other White scholars, who, for example, only study White male philosophers or White female philosophers from Europe. It will be incumbent upon him to identify (or certainly try to identify) the procrustean limits of his knowledge, interests, and focus—and, of course, reveal himself as racist. Critically engaging his whiteness, he will begin to enter those courses that are filled with White bodies, mostly White *male* student bodies, that are also taught by White professional philosophers (again, mostly White and male) prepared to call into question not only the ways in which

White bodies easily occupy the spaces within those classrooms, but he will also challenge the limited and value-laden epistemological assumptions that prevail within the conceptual space of that course or other courses.

This raises the fact that such spaces are also violent spaces, especially in terms of what they communicate to nonwhite bodies. Those spaces monochromatically speak to nonwhite bodies as unwanted; and communicate to nonwhite bodies that their epistemic experiences are nugatory. As a person of color, one undergoes experiences of alienation vis-à-vis an imposed and deceitful universality. As a Black philosopher, I have often gotten the sense that students of color within my courses breathe a sigh of relief not only because I speak to the entire class with fearless speech (or *parrhesia*) about the realities of race/racism, but because my bodily presence reflects back to them their own “raced” embodied selves. Given this, I would argue that my presence provides for them a sense of sanity. My discursive challenges, and the challenges of my embodied presence, communicate to them (a) that they have been correct about so many of those instances of subtle racism and (b) that, despite the domination of White academic bodies within academic spaces, they can become professional academics of color.

I have given talks about race on so many university campuses where the student body is predominantly White. And, almost always, I have been told by students of color, the few that are there, that they are in need of my fearless speech about race; that they are in need of scholars of color. In fact, many faculty of color will also make it clear, though often quietly, that the university has failed them, that the university is afraid to engage race seriously and openly. I have even been told by faculty of color that publishing within the area of race, especially where whiteness is critiqued, can threaten their careers, possibly blocking tenure and promotion. I have been told that they stand in fear of the repercussions; that they are scared. I have no reason to doubt this. As such, scholars of color who critically engage race and who attempt to disclose the ways in which whiteness continues in 2013 to usurp power and control bodies of color and curricula, and who face departments and academic administrators who attempt to derail forms of critical scholarship regarding race, might be said to be fighting behind enemy lines. Within such spaces, academics of color suffer; many may even kowtow and relinquish their academic projects, their passions for racial justice, and perhaps dumb down their intellectual criticality. Others may stand and fight and face the consequences. Many predominantly White universities will accommodate critical voices of color. Of course, as scholars of color who see it as our mission to engage in “radical scholarship,” more generally, we owe it to ourselves to think critically about the price of that accommodation.

There are other scholars of color who are not afraid to voice their predicaments, or, perhaps, who do so indirectly, posing questions as opposed to making direct accusations against their home universities. This is telling. I gave a talk at a predominantly White university where I argued that Black people, because of their epistemic social locations, are able to see whiteness in ways that Whites miss

or obfuscate.<sup>7</sup> I concluded that Black people possess a *gift* of insight into White ways of being and that Black people are thereby necessary for installing what I call a form of White double consciousness, where Whites see themselves through the eyes of Black people. One Black female faculty member attending my public talk raised a very powerful point. She wanted me to address what she judged to be a problematic implication of my view. She argued that, based upon my view, White people would then be dependent upon Black people for the former's liberation. She saw this as a form of White dependency and control. In short, Black people would be placed in the position of serving White people. While I argued that this was not what I had in mind, she had a point. Was I not arguing that Black scholars—and, perhaps I might add, scholars of color more generally—must function both as objects of White racist vitriol and as liberators of White people, liberating them from their racism? I must admit that this is a very peculiar place to occupy and a fecund issue that needs to be addressed.

My initial response was that, if she did not want to take on that role, she ought to leave the university. This response, though, communicated more than I desired. My aim, or so I believe, was to bring attention to the reality of the degree of White racism on *that* campus. "If this place is racist, and it certainly sounds like it is, then leave." "If it is hostile to academics of color, then leave. No one needs to work in such a racially toxic space." After much thought, I have come to think differently about this. Imagine a woman complaining about sexual harassment on the job and the best that we can offer her is the advice: "Just leave!" We will have failed her. After all, where are Black women to teach in academia where whiteness is absent? And where are women to work without the presence of male power? Within the context of this discussion regarding race in the classroom, it is my sense that we must hold accountable predominantly White universities and colleges to do all that they can to make the places where we, as scholars and academics of color, are not working alone as liberators of White students/people. While I believe that Black people are necessary to the project of "undoing" whiteness, as Whites may not be able to do it themselves, I am not arguing that Black people or people of color must bear the sole responsibility to change White people.

White people who have come to understand many of the complexities involved in the deep socio-structural and psychic dimensions of whiteness will prove essential for helping other Whites to face the problems of whiteness. To argue that Black people and people of color shoulder this responsibility alone only adds insult to injury. So, unlike what Joy A. James and João Costa Vargas brilliantly theorize as the "Black cyborg," which is "a modified, improved human whose increased ethical, spiritual, and physical capabilities generate unusual strength, omniscience, and boundless love,"<sup>8</sup> I would argue that Black people are not angelic *Übermenschen*, slavish gift-givers whose sole telos it is to liberate White people from their racism. Whiteness is not an ontological ineradicable feature of human existence. It is, on this score, contingent. It had a beginning and therefore, logically, it can have an end. And while whiteness, as an ideological and historical

process, is structurally anti-Black, there is the hope that it can and will be undone. The price to be paid is unknown.

I would argue that *Exploring Race in Predominantly White Classrooms: Scholars of Color Reflect* functions for scholars of color as a site of safety and sanity, driving home the reality that they are not alone. The text provides a space for validating shared experiences of the complexities, challenges, and difficulties of pedagogically engaging the theme of race in predominantly White academic spaces, classrooms in particular. As such, then, for scholars of color, the text helps to militate against the voices of those who deny the epistemic integrity of the experiences that scholars of color endure within such classrooms. The text speaks to those White scholars who also engage race within their classrooms, communicating to them that, as scholars of color, we face very different challenges when we engage race within our classrooms. Knowledge of this difference can help White academics to think critically about how their White bodies may go racially unmarked within such spaces and what the pedagogical implications of this might entail. This does not deny, however, that students of color, and some of our fellow colleagues of color, have not been accustomed to seeing the world through what Joe R. Feagin calls the "White racial frame." According to Feagin:

For centuries, to the present day, the dominant [White] racial frame has sharply defined inferior and superior racial groups and authoritatively rationalized and structured the great inequalities of this society. In a White-washing process, and most especially today, this dominant framing has shoved aside, ignored, or treated as incidental numerous racial issues, including the realities of persisting racial discrimination and racial inequality.<sup>9</sup>

There have been times, though few, when students of color—specifically, my African American students—have denied White skin privilege and have embraced a colorblind liberalism, who have argued that the world is different now in terms of race relations. In moments like these, I am reminded that, just because there are students of color in my classrooms, it doesn't mean that I am preaching to the choir. Students of color are also in need of critical discourses about race, discourses that fearlessly engage the subtle and overt racist dynamics in White America. Yet, unlike their fellow White classmates, not having available such a critical framework can cost them their lives.

I recall giving a lecture once where a Black female student defended tooth and nail that the view that I had provided of White racist America did not apply to her. My sense is that she saw herself as a young, productive, and smart undergraduate, someone whose "racial" identity did not matter. She seemed terribly offended when I said that White America sees her and me as "Niggers" despite our successes. However, she persisted. The air was tense. I even felt as if I was being too strong. Yet, I pushed the narrative that the color of her skin diminished her *in the eyes of White America*. Not that she was any less, but that White America saw her

as less. I could see that she was angry and deeply uncomfortable. Other students of color in the audience, through nods of agreement, supported my narrative. However, it wasn't a victory for me. Rather, I saw it as an important message that needed to be communicated to both that young Black female student and to the other students of color who were present. I provided a realistic, though deeply unfortunate, conceptualization of White America; it was a racial narrative that might, one day, preserve her sanity or perhaps save her life. It is important that, as scholars of color, we don't forget that our students of color (indeed, even many of our colleagues of color) have come "to see the world wrongly."<sup>10</sup> Hence, not only has violence been done to White students within our classrooms, but violence has also been done to students of color.

Thus, I return to the claim I made earlier—that violence has already been done to our White students before we face them in classrooms in which we are excited about critically engaging race and dispelling ignorance about the realities of racism. My point here is that my White students have already been lied to; the strength and force of distortion has already taken hold. There are forms of "violence" that are subtle, quiet, and that don't bring attention to their enactment. Yet, they exist. The social matrix within which this violence takes place can be a place as familiar and as benign as one's home, where White children are told that racism is something of the past; and where, when it does raise its ugly head, they are told that such instances are only minor and anomalous. They have been taught to see themselves as unraced, as persons qua persons. Many of them come to my classes believing in the Horatio Alger narrative and the promises of meritocracy without any knowledge of how their whiteness has functioned, and continues to function, to elevate them over similarly situated people of color. They live according to a philosophical anthropology where they see themselves as autonomous subjects who move through history with absolute freedom and as a law unto themselves. They see themselves as liberal subjects extricated from effective history, especially the effective history of White racism. Like being born from the head of Zeus, they begin their lives as if "full grown," without having *become* White, without being *complicit* with whiteness, especially where that whiteness forms the site from which they have come *to think* and *to feel* about the world as they do.

As Barbara Applebaum writes:

Most significantly, this notion of White complicity is grounded in the belief that one cannot transcend the social system that frames how one makes meaning of oneself and the social world within which one is embedded.<sup>11</sup>

In short, the lie of non-complicity has already taken hold. They have already been given over to whiteness; to live in bad faith and denial about the ways in which they are free from complicity vis-à-vis White racism. After all, the threshold for perpetuating White racism is very low; all that is necessary is for White people to

do nothing at all. Yet, in doing nothing at all, one makes a contribution. One still chooses and that choice produces results or sustains results. There is no "outside," as it were, in terms of which Whites escape processes of White interpellation. By the time White students have arrived to our classrooms, they have already been shaped by White ways of being-in-the-world, White ways of avoiding the issue of White privilege, White ways of constructing nonwhite bodies as "different," White ways of seeing themselves as "innocent" of White racism, and White ways of taking up space and moving through that space in the capacity of ownership and possession. Of course, these White ways of being-in-the-world have profound implications for people of color, implications that our White students have come to find effective ways to deny. It is this denial that is dialectically linked to the preservation of White students' sense of moral character. As Applebaum writes:

White people contribute to the perpetuation of systemic racism through benefitting from a perpetuating and systemically induced ignorance, a relentless readiness to deny, ignore and dismiss what victims who experience the effects of racism are saying in order that White people can maintain their moral innocence.<sup>12</sup>

I have argued elsewhere<sup>13</sup> that Whites are *embedded* within the history of White racism. In short, my White students are implicated in a complex network of racist power relationships. On this score, White racism constitutes a heteronomous web of White practices to which they, as Whites, are linked as both beneficiaries of such a web and as co-contributors to the web's continual function. White racial oppression, power, and privilege can be conceptualized, though not exclusively so, as uneventful acts of being White, like walking into a store and not being followed. In this way, White racial oppression, power, and privilege are linked to ways of being White in the world. My White students have difficulty accepting what I call the "conception of the embedded White racist." In my view, though, this conception of the embedded White racist self helps them come to terms with, though not without tremendous resistance, the ways in which they have been lied to about the social ontologically robust ways in which they are *not* self-identical substances moving through space and time, fully self-present and fully autonomous. Exploring the ways in which they are embedded within a preexisting social matrix of White power—one that is fundamentally constitutive, though not deterministic—my White students are encouraged to think critically about ways in which they are *not* sites of complete self-possession, but sites of dispossession. This concept of dispossession is theorized in ways that challenge my White students' assumption that it is through a sincere act of introspection that the limits of their racism can be ascertained. On this score, my White students have difficulty accepting what I refer to as the "conception of the opaque White racist."

My White students assume that if they "look" deep enough and shine the light of consciousness brightly and for long enough they will be able to determine the

full extent of their racism. Indeed, they assume that the process of ascertaining the limits of one's White racism is guaranteed by an "all-knowing" consciousness that is capable of peeling back, as it were, various levels of internalized racism and at once discovering a nonracist innocent White core. In this view, my White students presume that, when it comes to ascertaining the complexity and depth of their own racism, they possess the capacity for absolute epistemic clarity, and that the self is transparent, fully open to inspection. However, as one embarks upon the process of giving an account of one's "racist limits," the White racist self has already "gotten done" by White racism in fundamentally and profoundly constitutive ways, ways that are densely complex. The White self that attempts to "ascertain such limits" has already arrived too late<sup>14</sup> to determine the complex and insidious ways in which White racism has become embedded within one's White embodied self. It is not that there is no transparency at all, that one is incapable of identifying various aspects of one's racist/nonracist White self. Rather, the reality of the sheer depth of White racialization is far too opaque.

The important point here is that our White students arrive in our classrooms already dispossessed. The assumption that they are in full possession of themselves, unencumbered by White racist sociohistorical and psychic processes that are constitutive of who they are as White, provides them with a sense of coherence and tranquility. It provides them with a sense of being at home in the world. To attempt to chip away at that feeling of being at home, that sense of cognition, of knowing one's place in the world, creates trauma for my White students.

As we neared the end of the semester in my Phenomenology of Race course—a course where, as mentioned above, we had discussed whiteness and the social/spatial world as ready to hand<sup>15</sup>—a graduate student argued that we must "put whiteness in crisis."<sup>16</sup> This, it seems to me, is just right. In fact, it occurs to me that this is what many scholars of color who teach race within predominantly White classrooms do. We create spaces where whiteness is put into crisis. This is certainly my effort. By theorizing the ways in which my White students are embedded within White racism, both historically and psychically, they begin to feel disoriented. Not all will benefit from that cognitive and emotive disorientation, that sense of phenomenological or lived uncertainty about what they "know" and "feel" about themselves, as Whites, and their whitewashed world. After all, we meet for only one semester, a few hours a week. Yet, there are some who undergo that sense of vertigo, even if only while in class. The very notion of dispossession is itself unnerving. This is partly why I make a point of sharing with *all* of my students that we are finite and destined for the grave. Faith aside, I want to instill in them that death awaits us, and that we may never cross this way again; that *this moment* in human existence, this moment of our awareness may never repeat itself in the history of the universe. I want them to feel the weight of dispossession; the reality that we have already been claimed by death through the contingency of our birth. The experience is profoundly humbling.

My effort is to cultivate a space where White students can experience crisis. In therapeutic terms, "crisis" is typically something that we want to mitigate and possibly medicate. By crisis, I don't only mean that sense of losing one's footing, of *losing one's way*, but the etymological sense (from Greek *krisis*; i.e., decision) where one is faced with the need to make a *decision*. Within the context of whiteness, where a single action or intention does not "undo" whiteness, the concept of *deciding* denotes a life of commitment to "undo," over and over again, the complex ways in which one is embedded in whiteness; it involves, as Clevis Headley argues, "a continuously affirmed refusal to prolong the ontological and existential project of whiteness."<sup>17</sup> Hence, the concept of crisis within this context is suggestive of an iterative process that is to be sustained. It is demanding as it will require an iterative process of *losing one's way* vis-à-vis one's whiteness, especially as White social norms militate against this process. Yet, one must *tarry* not only with the feeling of loss, but with the pain and suffering that people of color endure because of the effects of the historical sedimentation of White supremacy and its continued subtle and not so subtle manifestations. One must be prepared to linger, to remain, with the truth about one's White self and the truth about how whiteness has structured and continues to structure forms of relationality that are oppressive to people of color. Of course, White people will typically flee such situations by denying the ways in which whiteness privileges them, and, thereby, the ways in which they need to begin to take forms of responsibility for confronting whiteness. As Applebaum writes, "White students often resist this knowledge because the only message they can hear is 'you are to blame.'"<sup>18</sup>

The point here, though, is not to blame or to instill immobilizing guilt, but to nurture responsibility. Yet, for academics of color who face White students in whom the violence has already taken place, where they already see themselves as autonomous and immune to interpellative forces, more is needed in order to cultivate vulnerability in them. They must be prepared to be *wounded*, to be touched. As Erinn Gilson writes:

Taken in this way, as a fundamental state, vulnerability is a condition of potential that makes possible other conditions. Being vulnerable makes it possible for us to suffer, to fall prey to violence and be harmed, but also to fall in love, to learn, to take pleasure and to find comfort in the presence of others, and to experience the simultaneity of these feelings. Vulnerability is not just a condition that limits us, but also one that can *enable* us. As potential, vulnerability is a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn.<sup>19</sup>

It is this vulnerability that enables White students to see that whiteness is held together by lies, and that, once they begin to question those lies, they begin to lose their way; that is, they begin to inhabit the world and move through the world in



ways that are *oblique*. It is at this point that they begin to question ways of being that they have taken for granted, ways that communicate to them that their lives are innocent and untouched by whiteness. Returning to my Phenomenology of Race course, I recall a White male student of mine who asked me how it was possible that he was negatively impacting his White daughter of only 11 months in ways that are racist. I explained to him that, even as she is young and innocent, she is nevertheless raced as White. As such, I explained that her whiteness has implications for where she will live, how long she might live, how others will treat her and respond to her. Yet, he was skeptical about his own direct influence on her vis-à-vis White racism. *This was one relationship that for him was exempt from the influence of whiteness.* He made motions of rocking her in his arms, making note of her innocence and sweetness. He continued to wonder just how he, especially given the way in which she is protected from anything as harsh as White racism, could possibly be communicating to his child the ugliness of racism. It was at this point that I said, "But will she ever feel safe in *Black arms*?"<sup>20</sup> I could see a clear change of expression on his face. Tarrying with this new insight, he went on to mention, in private, the fact that his daughter is only held by his parents and his wife's parents, all of whom are White. He recognized the weight of this moment; he was wounded by the realization that his daughter does not know (or has not known) the security of Black arms, that her life is filled with White people only, White bonding, White social and White familial spaces. Through such "natural" acts of bonding, which *exclude* Black bodies and bodies of color, his daughter is learning, even if pre-linguistically, to mark Black bodies and bodies of color as problematic bodies, untouchable bodies, or, at the very least, unnecessary bodies. I got the sense that he had only one Black friend who did not live close at all and who he sees far too infrequently. He was thankful for and disturbed by the realization that his little girl was already learning how to perform whiteness through her proximity to other/all White bodies, and how *he helped* to perpetuate this. Because of such monochromatically *White* social spaces, he realized how she was already being taught to perceive Black bodies as "Other," "different," "deviant," "dangerous." It was a painful realization, but one that he carried with, courageously faced, with no appearance of wanting to flee.

What we need are critical spaces where vulnerability can be nurtured in White students who find themselves faced with critical questions about race that mark their bodies as problem bodies. Creating moments of "trauma" (etymologically, to wound) within the context of classrooms, forms of trauma that unsettle various meta-narratives that ground and underwrite White privilege and superiority, is necessary for White students in order to begin to disarticulate various mythopoetic constructions of whiteness that have reinforced their "naturalized" place of dominance in the world. We need a form of *Bildung* or *paideia* that actually cultivates vulnerability in White students, a cultural space where they are wounded, undergo moments of trauma and narrative disorganization in terms of their whiteness. We need to create a culture of crisis where White students get

to face their finitude, their emptiness, and all of the lies that they have been told and raised to believe. To tarry within this space is about being reborn, which is always a painful process. Yet, it is about realizing that this rebirth is always a penultimate process. Given that our White students have lived with a multitude of lies about their "natural supremacy" and "entitlement" for such a long time, they will also need to grieve<sup>21</sup>: to grieve the loss of an imperial self, and to grieve in the form of *gravitas/heaviness*, which, on the flip side, may lead to a form of ethical responsibility or maturity, requiring constant ontological renewal. It is here that White people who have come to embrace the importance of White crisis and the value of losing their way, who will be needed to carry the weight of White anger, White frustration, and White resentment that is so often unleashed upon bodies of color within and outside the classroom, will need to create a "container" whereby White students are able to express crisis and uncertainty felt as they strive to struggle with transformation or metanoia and grieve the process of loss.

## Notes

- 1 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC; London, England: Duke University Press, 2006), 133.
- 2 Linda Martin Alcoff, "Alien and Alienated," in *Reframing the Practice of Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge*, ed. George Yancy (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), 23.
- 3 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 139.
- 4 Donna-Dale Marciano, "Re-Reading Plato's *Symposium* Through the Lens of a Black Woman," in *Reframing the Practice of Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge*, ed. George Yancy (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), 232.
- 5 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 132.
- 6 The reader should note that the scholars of color within this text are not restricted to challenging racist hegemony alone. I focus on race here as this was the hegemonic site that scholars of color were asked to address within this text.
- 7 See George Yancy, *Look, a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012), especially the introduction.
- 8 João Costa Vargas and Joy A. James, "Refusing Blackness-as-Victimization: Trayvon Martin and the Black Cyborgs," in *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics*, eds. George Yancy and Janine Jones (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 198.
- 9 Joe R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 21.
- 10 Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY; London, England: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18.
- 11 Barbara Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 14.
- 12 Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good*, 46.
- 13 See Yancy, *Look, a White!*, especially chapter six.
- 14 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press), 79.
- 15 Important to this course was reading Sara Ahmed's "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," in *Feminist Theory*, 8(2), 2007: 149–168. The discourse of "loss" within this introduction is partly influenced by her work.



- 16 While I have thought about crisis vis-à-vis whiteness prior to this course, I would like to thank Amber Kelsie for this specific phrasing and for the courage with which she staked her claim.
- 17 Clevis Headley, "Delegitimizing the Normativity of 'Whiteness': A Critical Africana Philosophical Study of the Metaphoricity of Whiteness" in *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, ed. George Yancy (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 103.
- 18 Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good*, 42.
- 19 See Erinn Gilson's "Vulnerability, Ignorance, and Oppression," in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 26(2), Spring 2011: 308–332—quote on p. 310.
- 20 While it is not my aim here to explore this issue in any greater detail, it is important to note that many White infants knew the safety of Black arms during American slavery. This, of course, speaks to the reality of Black enslaved women who were forced to nurture and comfort White infants, White children. Within this context, the ethical contradictions abound, especially as these same nurtured White bodies would grow up to inherit as property the Black bodies that nurtured them, Black bodies that were deemed disposable (relative to White bodies) and wretched.
- 21 I would like to thank my colleague Kathy Glass for sharing this insight.

# 1

## "THE WHITENESS IS THICK"

### Predominantly White Classrooms, Student of Color Voice, and Freirian Hopes

Kirsten T. Edwards

#### Changes, Movements, and Revelations

##### "Sexy"

I am a critical scholar.<sup>1</sup> I am a womanist, not a feminist.<sup>2</sup> I incorporate critical race theory, postcolonial studies, counter-narrative techniques, and the like in my research. My desire for teaching, research, and service is always emancipatory.<sup>3</sup> And I try to make these intentions clear in my academic and nonacademic spaces. I am a critical scholar of color in a White academy.

As a Black woman with a PhD who writes about issues of equity and access, particularly in reference to race, class, and gender, I surprisingly look great on paper. One of my colleagues tells me my work is "sexy!". He means my work is provocative and racy (race-y). But, the more I think about this adjective—"sexy"—as a descriptor for my life's work, which is primarily situated within a "White capitalist patriarchal hegemon[ic]" academy,<sup>4</sup> the more I recognize its profound truth.

My scholarship is simply sexy in this place—attractive and alluring, inciting arousal and pleasurable recreation—not substantive, significant, or necessary to what is done here; just auxiliary and marginal. Like Fasching-Varner's claims,<sup>5</sup> my scholarly work on "race and racism remain fictionalized, untrue, and quasi-literary in the imagination of readers, particularly White readers. In this sense, whites never take responsibility or action for racist behavior, belief, and treatments of whole groups of people".<sup>6</sup> Instead of a platform for substantive change, I provide the White academy that little bit of "cut-up,"<sup>7</sup> or discursive disruption. My work is provocative and offers the necessary edge to keep the intelligentsia publically relevant.<sup>8</sup> The intelligentsia or White intellectual establishment publicly